

The Middle Power Dream: South Korea's Journey through Political Opportunity Structures, Middle Power Capacity, Middle Power Diplomacy and Middlepowermanship

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Introduction

Until recently, (South) Korea has always been under the shadow of a greater power. At the beginning of the modern era, Korea went from vassal state of China to colony of Japan. After liberation, Korea was torn in two, the North became part of the Soviet-led communist bloc, and the South became an anti-communist state under American influence. With the war that followed –which devastated both halves and killed millions of people – Korea hit rock bottom. After the Korean War, South Korea was one of the poorest countries of the world, and relied heavily on foreign aid and military protection by the US. However, within just a few decades, South Korea managed to climb back up. It rapidly developed its economic and military capacity to new heights, underwent a process of democratization and started to participate more actively in international society. Eventually, South Korea became something it could not have imagined before, a modern middle power. As South Korea's international status and confidence rose, so did the question of how to be a middle power and deal with the challenges the country faced.

South Korea finds itself in a unique and complex geopolitical situation. First of all, there is North Korea, an existential threat that was born out of the division. On top of that, after the division both Koreas were absorbed into the Cold War, in a geopolitical region where major powers compete with each other. Even though the Cold War has ended, South Korea's worries have not. North Korea still is a major factor in South Korea's foreign policy calculations. This is not only because of the military threat North Korea poses, but also because of the interests that the great powers have concerning the North Korea issue. Especially China and the US have high stakes in the Korean peninsula. For South Korea it may be good to know that it will be protected by the US if necessary, but on the other hand its dependence on greater powers also limits its maneuverability. This is exactly the kind of dilemma that a middle power has to deal with. One could argue that North Korea is the most important obstacle for South Korea to gain more influence. But on the other hand, if South Korea manages to mediate a solution to the North Korean issue through diplomacy, then that would be one of the greatest opportunities to prove itself as a successful middle power and a valuable member of international society.

This is exactly what president Kim Daejung attempted to do. He tried to break through the Cold War mentality and focus on dialogue and reconciliation. His efforts did not remain unnoticed in the international community, which resulted in a Peace Nobel Prize in 2000. His successor, Roh Moo-hyun continued along similar lines, and it was during his presidency that the term middle power started to be used. Western scholars at that time were very positive about South Korea's foreign

policy and were optimistic about the future. The next president, Lee Myung Bak, however, reversed South Korea's North Korea policy, while still actively trying to advertise South Korea as a successful middle power. This suggests that there has been a shift in the way the concept of middle power is explained and used in South Korea's foreign policy. What has changed in the conceptualization and use of the term middle power in South Korea between the Roh Moo-hyun and Lee Myung-bak presidency? What are the main internal and external factors that brought about this shift? This thesis is an attempt to answer these questions. Although a country's foreign policy has many aspects, and I will mention a few of them, my main focus will be on South Korea's North Korea policy, because this issue is one of the most urgent ones, and also the issue that shows the sharpest contrast in terms of the foreign policies of the two administrations.

In the first chapter I will provide the theoretical framework for this thesis, starting with the question: "What is a middle power?" While scholars such as Jordaan endeavored to "rescue the concept from increasing vagueness"¹, I attempt to show its complex and multilayered nature. I will argue that being a successful middle power consists of four separate layers, namely the opportunities and limitations offered by the geopolitical situation it finds itself in, its medium-sized capacity in terms of military, and economic and soft power, its usage of the diplomatic methods that are available to middle powers, and the internal decision-making process and self-identification that lies behind a middle power's behavior. In other words, being a middle power is an interaction between middle power capacity, political opportunity structures, middle power diplomacy and middlepowermanship. This definition implies that a middle power is not a static, singular entity, but that there are many kinds and degrees of middle powers that change over time. It also suggests that middle power status is partly invented, a term to which a certain standing, identity and a variety of roles are being ascribed in the current world order. The four terms in this definition are closely related to each other, and in many cases overlap and influence each other. Although I take them apart and discuss them separately in this thesis, throughout this study I intent to show how they interact and inform each other. I will start with political opportunity structures, because this is the overarching structure that forms the context in which the other three exist. State capacity will follow, and then these two will determine the options for middle power diplomacy. Lastly, I will look at middlepowermanship, the deepest layer that encompasses a state's ideas, identities, fears and aspirations. For this part I will mainly use International Relations theory, supplemented with, surprisingly, social movement theory.

Though this broad definition may be a nightmare for those who like to neatly categorize countries, it is a very insightful lens through which to gain a deeper understanding of individual

¹ Jordaan (2003), P. 165

(aspiring) middle powers such as South Korea. In the second part of chapter one I will give a brief overview of existing (Western) literature on South Korea as a middle power. This is also the part in which I will argue the importance of describing all the above mentioned aspects in the South Korean context in order to better understand South Korea's development and changes as a middle power. I will also show why the differences between the presidencies of Roh Moo-hyun and Lee Myung-Bak is such an interesting case.

In chapter two I will analyze South Korea's rise as a middle power and explorations of middlepowermanship through each of the theoretical lenses explained in chapter one. In the last part on middlepowermanship I will pay special attention to the two aforementioned presidencies.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Framework

1.1 Defining Middle Power: Middle Power Capacity, Political Opportunity Structures, Middle Power Diplomacy and Middlepowermanship

The world as we know it today consists of a large number of sovereign states that each try to secure their own survival and prosperity. In order to do this, states need to interact, be it peacefully or not. This state system is essentially anarchic, because there is no higher entity that tells the states how to behave and how to interact with each other. The stronger a state is, the more influence it can exert on others. The international system is regulated by the most dominant state or states (the so-called hegemons), creating a hegemonic order that determines the norms and rules of the system. A recent addition to that is the rise of institutions, in which member states make and (self-)impose the norms and work together to solve international problems. Despite these institutions, the strongest states still have the largest say.

It is within this context that the term middle power was invented. In its most basic form, the concept of middle power is a category that indicates how much power a state has in relation to other states. As the word "middle" suggests, a middle power's amount of power is somewhere in the middle, in between the states that have the most power (great powers) and those that have the least power (small powers). This categorization of states (this doesn't only apply to modern nation states.) into three or more types has started a long time ago. However, there has been an ongoing academic debate about criteria that define what makes a middle power a middle power. The term middle

power is no longer just a statistical term, but it has also become a normative one. Especially in the last few decades there has been an increasing amount of scholars who argue that there is more to middle power status than merely having a medium amount of power. Researchers such as Jeffrey Robertson identified a “dichotomy between middle powers based on behavior and middle powers based on capacity”. When scholars of the capacity camp (such as Holbraad) and the behavior camp (Cooper, Higgot and Nossal) each made a list of middle powers, their lists were very different and unsatisfactory.² According to Robertson, Eduard Jordaan reconciles the two by making a distinction between traditional and emerging middle powers. Although his distinction is a very useful one (as we will see in the following sections), it is obvious that he is on the side of those in favor of the behavior-based approach (though this doesn’t mean he thinks capacity is irrelevant). He attempts to explain why these two kinds of middle powers behave in a different way based on their different backgrounds. But he does this while on the other hand excluding the middle capacity countries that do not ‘behave as a middle power’ at all:

“Middle powers do not challenge or threaten the global status quo – that is, the economic and military-political ‘balance’ of power – nor the desirability of liberal democracy, in any fundamental way. States that deviate from hegemonic orthodoxy cannot be conceived of as middle powers in the sense that the term is used in this [his] article. Consequently, states excluded from the middle-power category are non-Western nuclear powers (e.g. China, India and Pakistan), alleged ‘sponsors of terrorism’ (e.g. Libya and Syria), economic deviants such as China and Cuba, and states for which the democratization of the rest of the world is not a priority, such as PRI-governed Mexico and most of the states in the Middle East.”³

We are still left with the question: does a country’s capacity and place in the world order cause it to behave in a certain way or is it the behavior itself that grants a state middle power status? (although most literature acknowledges that middle capacity is a prerequisite for middle power behavior) In more extreme words, is middle power diplomacy a survival strategy or is it part of an ideology⁴?

I believe it is both. A state’s capacity (especially in relation to that of other states) determines what a state can and cannot do. In order to be successful within the boundary of its capabilities, it needs to choose a strategy that matches its place in the pecking order. Therefore, something can be said about ‘typical’ middle power behavior, because there is only a limited set of behaviors available to middle-sized powers. Since middle powers do not have the power to overthrow the hegemons,

² Robertson (2007) p. 152-153

³ Jordaan (2003) p. 167

⁴ Stairs (1998) p. 282

they can only defend their interests by playing a role of importance within the existing hegemonic order, and by doing so they confirm and reinforce this order. These roles will then become what the dominant world order expects of middle powers, because anything else is seen a potential threat and will be suppressed. So in order to be accepted as a middle power, a state needs both the capacity and the 'correct' behavior.

However, a simple combination between capacity and behavior is not enough to fully understand middle powers. A state may have middle power capacity, but if the geopolitical situation is unfavorable, this greatly limits that state's options. If we want to get a good grasp of a state's maneuvering space, we need to look at the political opportunity structures that are provided by the geopolitical situation. I will further explain this term below.

Middle power (or any other kind of state for that matter) behavior can also be split up into two aspects. The first one is behavior as a practical tool or strategy to achieve one's goals and protect one's interests. A state has to choose the best approach to match its capabilities. In the case of a middle power the best tool is diplomacy. The second aspect is the reasoning behind and the justification for its chosen approach. This element goes deeper than mere practicality and deals with roles, identities and values. Cooper agrees that "middle power status is not only about objective criteria, but also about self-identity".⁵ A middle power deliberately chooses to take on an international role and thus assumes an identity as a good (and successful) member of international society and advertizes itself as such (both internationally as internally). This is usually referred to as middlepowermanship.

These four elements all influence and/or inform each other. Therefore, in order to analyze the emergence, development and change (and perhaps, in some cases, also the decline) of middle powers, it is essential to look at the interaction between them. Though this broad definition may be a nightmare for those who like to make a neat list of middle powers based on statistics, it is a very insightful lens through which we may gain a deeper understanding of individual (aspiring) middle powers and place their behavior in the proper context.

Political Opportunity Structures

Political opportunities and political opportunity structures are the external political factors that form the framework within which a state can maneuver. The concept of political opportunity structures is originally found in social movement theory. Social movement scholars commonly use a set of three lenses to analyze and compare social movements, namely political opportunity structures, mobilizing

⁵ Cooper (2015) p. 9

structures and framing processes⁶. The theory of political opportunity structures comes from the idea that there is a clear link between institutionalized politics and social movements. The political structures of a state (and changes therein) provide civil movements with opportunities and limitations, and researchers try to explain the emergence and success of certain movements based on the political system, and use this to compare political systems (and the movements that prosper there).⁷

In the same way, if we apply this theory to the international system, the political structure of the system provides states with both opportunities and limitations. Furthermore, in terms of power you could say that middle powers are the social movements of international society⁸. Social movements do not have any institutional power, so they can't directly change policies the way a government can, but they are much more powerful than individual citizens and they can influence the government, especially if they can form coalitions with other movements and mobilize citizens. The international system may not have an autonomous central government, but it is not complete anarchy in the sense that every state can do exactly as it pleases. There is a dominant order dictated by the greatest powers, reinforced by smaller powers and to some extent even institutionalized through organizations such as the United Nations. So in the anarchical international realm middle sized states can't force greater states to do anything, but they can exert influence.

Several examples can be given of political opportunities within the international order. Firstly, one of the events that created political opportunities for middle powers is the (end of the) Cold War. Traditional middle powers became prominent as middle powers during the Cold War, but the end of the Cold War allowed new middle powers to emerge, because "the multipolar system into which the post-Cold War world seems to be evolving at the state level creates more opportunities than hitherto for a positive role for so-called middle powers. Multipolarity opens up space, disorder creates incentives, and there are numerous flashpoints in which middle-power conflict resolution skills could be beneficial."⁹

Secondly, norm change can also be seen as a form of changing political opportunity structures. States within the current hegemonic order are expected to find peaceful solutions to conflicts. This has diminished (but definitely not obviated) the importance of military power. And,

⁶ In this thesis I have only directly taken over one of these three, but a strong case could be made for incorporating the other two in middle power theory as well (with some modifications). In a way, 'mobilizing structures' deal with the 'capacity' of a social movement, which could be adapted to fit the capacity aspect of middle power states. Furthermore, framing processes are an integral part of middlepowermanship.

⁷ McAdam et al (1996)

⁸ And perhaps also in terms of behavior. Middle powers tend to focus on certain issues (or 'niches'), such as environmental issues, and try to convince other states to cooperate in addressing them. However, Jordaan (2003) p. 178, wonders if international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are usurping many of the roles previously performed by middle powers.

⁹ Booth (1998) p. 19

with the expansion of free market economy, globalization and increasing interdependence, economic capacity and the ability to cooperate internationally have become more and more important.

One could say that in general the current age has quite favorable political opportunity structures for middle powers to thrive. However, if one takes a closer look at individual middle powers, as I will do with the case of South Korea in the next chapter, it becomes clear that specific (regional) political opportunity structures, in combination with a state's unique traits, influence their policy decisions and outcomes in a unique way. This means that in order to truly understand middle powers, it is insufficient to look at general political opportunity structures and general middle power characteristics. I argue that the most valuable insights can be gained by looking at individual countries.

So far I have only focused on international political opportunity structures. Of course there are also internal political processes that shape a state's behavior. However, when I refer to 'political opportunity structures' in this thesis, I only mean international political opportunities. Since internal politics are an integral part of a state's own policy making process, I will discuss that aspect in the 'middlepowermanship' section.

Middle Power Capacity

What kind of capabilities should a state have in order to be called a middle power? According to Realist theory, military and economic capacity is what gives a state power. This kind of hard power is usually measured by looking at a state's resources such as its size of armed forces, gross domestic product, territory and population¹⁰. With the current hegemonic order consisting mostly of liberal democracies, which are said to not wage war against each other, and with the increasing dominance of the market economy, economic power seems to have become equally, if not more, important than military power.¹¹

States with high hard power capacity are able to simply order, or coerce, other states what to do. However, many scholars, starting with Nye, argue that in order to be successful a state also needs soft power, which refers to capabilities to be attractive to other states, or to make other states "want what it wants". Examples of soft power are culture, ideology and institutions.¹² Another form of power that may also fall under the category of soft power, is network power. Network power is the ability and diplomatic capacity to engage with other states and non-state actors through various platforms. A strong network allows a state to bargain, form coalitions, mediate in conflicts and promote other kinds of soft power with other states. The most basic form of interstate networking is

¹⁰ Though there are many valid indicators of economic strength, for the sake of conciseness I will only use GNP per capita in dollars in my section on South Korea's capacity

¹¹ See Gartzke (2007), for example

¹² Nye (1990), p. 166

through bilateral diplomatic ties. This is, however, not enough to play a role of importance in the current age. Membership and active participation in international institutions are expected of developed countries, and if a country really wants to distinguish itself, it needs to successfully take, promote and take the lead in different international initiatives.

Many believe that soft power, and especially network power, is where the strength of middle powers lay. "To great powers, soft power is something to supplement their hard power in order to enjoy more comprehensive power. On the other hand, middle powers tend to regard soft power as an alternative source of influence to compensate for their weaker economic and military power."¹³ According to the Encyclopedia of Governance, what sets Middle powers apart from weak states is their "highly institutionalized foreign services" and their ability to "disseminate their ideas and foreign policy objectives through the relatively wide network of diplomatic missions they maintain".¹⁴ In other words, another decisive form of capacity for middle powers is social capital¹⁵, or diplomatic capital if you will.

One must not, however, make the mistake of thinking that a middle power can fully compensate its lack of hard power with soft power. Even though great powers can impose their will more easily, this doesn't mean they don't see any value in building up network power and other kinds of soft power. They too seek to enhance their image and influence through diplomacy. Furthermore, a state with a dominant military and economic position has more opportunities to build up soft power than weaker states. For example, American pop culture is still the most popular in the world. Another example is the fact that some networks and forums (such as the G20) are only accessible for those with considerable hard capacity. Again, a middle power is a state with more than average capabilities. This goes for both hard and soft power.

When it comes to classifications, even in terms of capacity it is difficult to define who is a middle power and who is not, because it not only depends on one's own capacity, but also on the capacity of surrounding states. To make matters even more complicated, measurements of middle power are also relative to the scale of measurement. A global middle power can be a regional great power and a global small power can be a regional middle power. Furthermore, as I implied above, political opportunity structures determine how much 'power' it takes to play a role of medium importance and which kind of power weighs the most.

Middle Power Diplomacy

¹³ Lee (2012) p. 19

¹⁴ Bevir (2007) p. 565

¹⁵ 'Social capital' is also a term originally from social movement theory, and refers to "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit". Putnam (1995)

Middle power diplomacy¹⁶ is the kind of diplomacy that is typically associated with (but not limited to) middle powers. It is the most important tool, or medium, through which to achieve its foreign policy goals. Dennis Stairs is right in saying that “having middling capabilities determines, not what middle power states will do, but what, in principle, they can do”.¹⁷ Their middle power capabilities, coupled with the (international) political structures give them a window of opportunities (and restraints) within which to maneuver. It is then up to the state to choose which of these to use and how. This section will only deal with possible diplomacies for and general tendencies of middle powers. A discussion on the actual (diplomatic) decision making processes of individual states can be found in the next part about middlepowermanship.

Jordaan has written a very decent overview of typical middle power behavior. He describes middle powers first and foremost as stabilizers and legitimizers of the status quo. This is because “their limited capacity to bring about global change leaves them vulnerable in times of great global instability” and “this inability guides middle powers towards utilizing and asserting themselves through international organizations relying on the authority afforded these institutions in order to manage and maintain the prevailing world order”. Because of this, middle powers are generally thought to behave as ‘good international citizens’. Furthermore, because middle powers’ foreign policies often deal with issues that seem to be beyond their immediate geographic position and direct self interest, they are often perceived to be selfless and even neutral actors. However, Jordaan argues that this kind of behavior is in fact in the interest of middle powers, but that their “self-interest can be located at a deeper and more dispersed level; that is, an interest in global stability, controllability and predictability”.

As mentioned earlier, Jordaan makes a distinction between traditional and emerging middle powers, each showing different middle power behaviors. The two main differences are that emerging middle powers usually play a much more active role in regional cooperation and integration than traditional middle powers, and that emerging middle powers are more ‘reformist’, while traditional powers are more ‘appeasing’.

A term that is included in almost all literature on middle power is ‘niche diplomacy’. This concept was originally invented by Andrew Cooper and refers to middle powers’ tendency to specialize in issues that do not immediately threaten the vital interest of great powers, such as environmental issues, nuclear non-proliferation and international economic order. In those international challenges, middle powers “are able to set and influence international agendas, build successful coalitions, and challenge great power hegemony in these issues”.¹⁸

¹⁶ Or middle power behavior

¹⁷ Stairs, in Booth (1998)

¹⁸ Bevir (2007) p. 564

When it comes to specific roles played by middle powers in international society, one could compile a long list of terms made by various scholars. Besides ‘stabilizer’ and ‘good international citizen’, there is a variety of other roles, such as ‘regional or sub-regional leader’, ‘functional leader’¹⁹, ‘facilitator’, ‘manager’, ‘balancer’, ‘mediator’, ‘peacekeeper’ and ‘community builder’. According to Wood, Middle powers can also display negative behavior, such as ‘free riding’, ‘fence sitting’, and ‘status seeking’.²⁰ All these roles would merit further explanation, but a detailed description of every possible role with examples is not the aim of this thesis, since it will be about the roles of one individual middle power. What is important, then, is the reason why a middle power decides to adopt a certain role, what meaning it gives to this role, and how it envisions to play this role. This brings us to the next and final factor, namely middlepowermanship.

Middlepowermanship

In literature on middle powers, ‘middlepowermanship’ has been a somewhat ambiguous term. It is often used interchangeably with ‘middle power diplomacy’, but sometimes also contains the meaning of ‘middle power statecraft’. My use of the term is closer to the latter. In this thesis I would like to use the term to describe the internal processes that shape individual middle power’s behaviors, including strategic analyses, ideology, public debates, identity issues and role perceptions. If political opportunity structures and capacity are the factors that determine a middle power’s maneuverability in the international order, and middle power diplomacy is the strategic tool that a middle power has, then middlepowermanship can be best described as the art of being a middle power. Successful middlepowermanship requires a medium capacity state to assess, acknowledge and own its place in the world order, with all its opportunities and limitations, and use those wisely to get the most out of it. This takes the confidence to show that it is not an insignificant state and that it can make a useful contribution to international society, but it also takes the humility to acknowledge that it is not a great power, meaning its tools are limited. It needs to decide what kind of middle power it wants to identify as, and what role it wants to play. Then it needs to map out a strategy to achieve this goal, and advertize itself as a middle power both internally as externally²¹. In other words, middlepowermanship (at least in this thesis) is the vision, identity and the decision-making process behind a state’s middle power behavior.

¹⁹ This means “being a leader in functional issue-areas in which the middle power happens to have particular strength”. (cited in Stairs (1998) p. 275)

²⁰ Cited in cited in Stairs (1998) p.275

²¹ One could argue that this doesn’t have to be advertisement as “middle power” per se. A distinction may be made between implicit and explicit middlepowermanship. Implicit middlepowermanship is when a state of medium capacity behaves like a middle power but doesn’t actually use the term “middle power” in its discourse.

Middlepowermanship is a key concept in understanding individual middle powers. Although we sometimes say that states need to 'find their place in the world', a state's place in the world order is not something that is just out there waiting to be found. The possible roles a state can play in the world are partly determined by its circumstances, but states (and the people who run them) do have a choice of how to deal with those circumstances. In other words, states have a certain degree of agency. One could say that middlepowermanship is the embodiment of middle power agency.

Furthermore, middlepowermanship is socially/politically constructed and constantly develops/changes. In my view, middlepowermanship (and every other 'powermanship' for that matter) consists of three main elements. The first is a strategic calculation based on an assessment by policy makers of the country's geopolitical situation, its own capabilities and events that take place. Since this assessment is a human-led process, it is always subjective. Therefore, in the context of middlepowermanship it is necessary to compliment the earlier mentioned political opportunity structures theory with another concept, namely perceived political opportunities²². It is the perception of political opportunity that shapes policy makers' decisions.

The second aspect is the goals, aspirations, and norms set by the foreign policy makers. How do they understand and explain the priorities, roles and concepts involved? Which meaning do they give to being a middle power? How do they envision the state's identity as a middle power? For this element it is important to look at framing processes. David Snow defined framing as "the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action".²³ To make this definition fit into middle power theory, one may replace 'collective action' with 'diplomatic action', or 'international political action'.

The distinction between traditional and emerging middle power might be interesting for explaining middlepowermanship as well. Traditional middle powers have long been established, whereas emerging middle powers still need to prove themselves, and need to achieve a newfound identity as a middle power, often having to get rid of the trauma of being a former colony. Such a state will be more likely to frame its middlepowermanship in terms of status.

The third layer is the internal social and political dynamics within a country that influence the decisions of those in power, or that even determine who will be in power in the first place. What are the views and interests of the ruling power? What about the opposition? What is the public opinion

²² This is not merely a 'correct' perception of political opportunity structures. In social movement literature, examples are given where social movements take action based on their perceived political opportunities (such as growing opposition strength), resulting in major social changes, while there were no significant structural changes in the state's political system beforehand. Charles Kurzman (1996) shows how this happened in the case of the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

²³ McAdam et al (1996) p. 6

on foreign policy issues? Furthermore, each new presidency is different, and usually a new president will distance himself from the previous one and try to make his or her own signature policy. Of course these three elements are closely related to each other and they also interact.

1.2 South Korea as a Middle Power

Much has been written about South Korea's foreign policy and about South Korea as a middle power. In 1991, Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant were one of the first scholars to acknowledge that South Korea's capacity had reached a middle power level,²⁴ but it wasn't until the mid to late 2000s that researchers started to note middle power behavior. The so-called Sunshine Policy, a policy started by president Kim Dae-jung and well known for its focus on engagement and reconciliation with North Korea, received particular attention and many saw this as proof that South Korea had become an active player in promoting conflict resolution and cooperation in the region. Furthermore, because Kim Dae-jung and his successor, Roh Moo-hyun, strengthened the ties with China and other countries in the region, experts believed that South Korea was attempting to get out of the shadow of the US and take matters into its own hands. In 2005 De Ceuster writes:

"If the Cold War is coming to an end on the Korean peninsula, then this is not only because the international situation has changed, but also because a new generation of politicians is at the helm. A regained awareness of agency is what makes all the difference. The unquestioned deference towards the US has been replaced by a strong sense of national dignity."²⁵

In 2007, near the end of the second and final term of the Roh Moo-hyun administration, scholars do mention that Roh is being criticized for his policy, because it would damage the relationship with the US, and that the opposition party would be most likely to win the presidential elections, but overall they were quite optimistic about his foreign policy's potential for the future. Rozman wrote that "even under a conservative president, south Korea is unlikely to give up its interest in regionalism and reconciliation".²⁶ In a similar way, but slightly more sensitive to possible changes in the policy towards North Korea, Robertson wrote:

²⁴ in Robertson (2007) p. 156

²⁵ De Ceuster (2005) p. 67

²⁶ Rozman (2007) p. 216

“A conservative administration, while paying greater lipservice to United States and perhaps seeking greater accountability in relations with North Korea, will not be able to fundamentally change South Korea’s newfound middle power foreign policy tendencies.”²⁷

However, when Lee Myung-bak took office in 2008, he reversed his predecessors’ North Korea policy, and the relationship with the DPRK deteriorated quickly. Yet even though the reconciliatory policy of the previous two governments was one the most important points that made the world see South Korea as a middle power, and even though it was an important part of Noh’s “balancer” and “middle power” discourse, the reversal of this policy did not mean that Lee Myung-bak gave up on the middle power dream. On the contrary. Lee launched his ‘Global Korea’ campaign and sought to “adopt middle power diplomacy strategically to enhance the country’s national status”.²⁸ 4 years into the Lee Myung-bak administration, Lee Sook-Jong even claims the following:

“South Korea’s foreign policy discourse specifically mentions “middle power” or jung-gyun-guk diplomacy both in government and among policy experts. This trend began to widely circulate following the inauguration of the Lee Myung-bak administration in 2008. [...] Although the Roh administration introduced the concepts of middle power roles and established important free trade networks, it did not set middle power diplomacy as an umbrella policy vision.”²⁹

She basically says that Roh may have invented the wheel, but Lee built the first car. Roh Moo Hyun’s diplomacy was already recognized and advertized as being that of a middle power, so it seems they just each built a totally different car, and had very different views on what the car should look like. In other words, it looks like they had very different ideas on what it means to be a middle power and what role South Korea should play in the region and in the world.

This major shift in middlepowermanship is something that hasn’t been studied much. Shin Soon-ok sought to analyze how domestic political and institutions shaped South Korea’s foreign policy and also incorporated the importance of identity formation. He concludes that “the experience of the ROK’s foreign policy activism during the Roh and Lee period indicates that its middle power credentials have evolved but remain essentially elusive”.³⁰

²⁷ Robertson (2007) p. 165

²⁸ Lee (2012) p. 14

²⁹ Lee (2012) p. 14

³⁰ Shin (2015) p. 18-19

In this thesis, I would like to use the theoretical concepts explained in the previous sections and apply them to the South Korean case, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the processes that shaped South Korea's first explorations of middlepowermanship.

Chapter 2

South Korea's Rise as a Middle Power

2.1 Political Opportunity Structures

Korea has always been a small country surrounded by larger powers, or, as the Korean saying goes, a shrimp among whales. For a long time, Korea was a vassal state of China. For Korea this was a fairly comfortable position, because even though the tributary system was hierarchical, it was a system of formal inequality, but informal equality³¹. This meant that as long as Korea respected and paid tribute to China, it could run its own course relatively undisturbed (apart from occasional invasions by the Mongolians, Japanese and Manchus).

This all changed when (Western) imperialism made its way into the far corners of East Asia at the end of the nineteenth century. Unable to fend off the newly industrialized stronger states that were preoccupied with the dominant "survival of the fittest" zeitgeist, also called social Darwinism, Korea became the object of a tug-o-war and had to helplessly endure a series of events it had not asked for. After two wars were fought on Korean territory³², Japan claimed dominance over Korea and colonized it in 1910. Korea was liberated in 1945 by the Soviet Union and the United States, who temporarily occupied respectively the northern and southern part of Korea. In light of the growing competition and ideological struggle between the two, they decided to divide Korea into two parts along the 38th parallel and installed a government of their own liking and ideology on each half. This division led to the Korean War, which devastated both Koreas. The war has officially never ended, and North Korea is still South Korea's (and probably even East Asia's) largest security threat.

In the meantime, international norms were also changing. Scott notes that "after 1945 imperialism became a term of opprobrium. Colonialism and the United Nations Charter were

³¹ Kang (2003) p. 164

³² The First Sino-Japanese War from 1894 to 1895 and the Russo-Japanese War from 1904 to 1905

increasingly recognized as incompatible, though independence was often slow and sometimes marked by prolonged and armed struggle. The cold war often complicated and hindered the transition to independence.”³³ In a way, the same goes for Korea. Although South Korea was recognized as an independent country soon after the capitulation of the Japanese, because of the Cold War and the threat of North Korea, the United States could not fully let go of South Korea. For a long time the two countries maintained a patron-client relationship and there is a strong US military presence in South Korea to this day.

On the other hand, one could argue that South Korea also benefited from its strategically important position during the Cold War. It received massive aid and military and political protection from the US, enabling it to recover after the Korean War and to become the country it is today. It also helped that South Korea was enlisted into the winning team of the Cold War, whereas North Korea had to deal with the severe consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The end of the Cold War marked yet another significant structural change in the global political sphere. It opened up space for interaction with states that were formerly a no go. Only North Korea remained as an existential threat to South Korea and also as a potential threat to regional stability. By that time, Japan had reemerged as an economic power and China was on the rise as well. For a long time, China had refused to recognize South Korea, but this changed by the end of the Cold War. In the years that followed, relations with China improved and eventually it became South Korea’s largest trading partner.

Since then, the two issues that have had the greatest impact on South Korea’s foreign policy options are the conflict with North Korea and the growing competition between China and the US.³⁴ The US wants to maintain its strong influence on South Korea, but as South Korea has managed to build up a successful economy of its own and became closer with China, the United States’ grip on South Korea has started to weaken. America does not see this as South Korea becoming more independent, but as becoming more anti-American and more pro-Chinese.³⁵ Therefore, South Korea needs to navigate wisely between its (trade) relationship with China and its alliance with the US.

In a way, North Korea serves as a buffer zone between China and the United States (with a large military force right at the border between North and South Korea. This is why China still supports North Korea (albeit more and more reluctantly) in order to avoid a regime collapse. Because both countries have strong interests in the Korean peninsula, the conflict between North and South Korea also causes tensions, or, in the case of the Korean War, even armed conflict between China and the United States. During the Korean War, China initially did not participate in the fighting. When

³³ Baylis et al (2008) p. 58

³⁴ Although territorial issues and increasing competition between China and Japan have also been creating tensions in the region.

³⁵ Kim and Lim (2007)

the US-led UN troops recovered the South Korean area conquered by the North Koreans, China did nothing. But when they decided to push ahead and launch an invasion into North Korea, China stepped in, because it didn't want US forces at its doorstep. The latest example of such tensions is the US and South Korean agreement to deploy a US THAAD missile defense system in South Korea, in reaction to North Korea's latest missile test. Beijing is very unhappy about this, and claims that the US is "using another country's insecurity as a foothold to enable its own security."³⁶

Of course China is not the only reason why the United States is so involved in the North Korean issue. North Korea itself also poses a security threat to the US (and vice versa). North Korea believes that the 'American imperialists' have been occupying South Korea for the past 70 years (with South Korea as their willing puppet) and fear that they have their eyes set on North Korea as well. Therefore North Korea feels that need to show its teeth and do everything in its power to deter the US, including developing nuclear weapons. This in turn greatly angers the US. Perhaps it is safe to say that 'the North Korea issue' is as much (or maybe even more) a conflict between North Korea and the US as it is a conflict between North and South Korea. Therefore, any South Korean attempt to find a solution hinges on the question of whether both the US and North Korea cooperate and follow through on their agreed commitments. A good example of how worsening US-North Korea relations can ruin South Korean peace building initiatives can be found at the turn of the 21st century. Kim and Lim wrote that "from 1998 to 2000 [at that time Kim Dae-jung was president of South Korea and president Clinton was leading the US], the United States and South Korea developed an effective division of labor in dealing with North Korea, by which the United States would contain North Korea's nuclear and missile programs through direct negotiations while South Korea would promote internal changes in North Korea through economic engagement".³⁷ This changed when George W. Bush became president in 2001 and reversed the US's North Korea policy. Because of suspicions that the North Koreans were secretly working on developing nuclear weapons, and in light of the US 'War on Terrorism', Bush listed North Korea as part of the "Axis of Evil". North Korea in turn retreated from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. North Korea-US relations quickly deteriorated and this greatly diminished the effectiveness of South Korea's policy of engagement. Therefore, when President Roh Moo-hyun took office in 2003, he was already in a tough position. The US and South Korea could not agree on how to deal with North Korea, and this caused serious frictions between the two.³⁸ Another

³⁶ Korea JoongAng Daily, 12-07-2016

<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3021159> viewed on 12-07-2016

³⁷ Kim and Lim (2007) p. 77

³⁸ Kim & Lim (2007) p. 76

factor that the most recent ROK presidents have had to deal with and respond to, are provocative actions by North Korea, especially the nuclear tests that have been conducted.³⁹

These are the most important examples of how political structures and events provided South Korea with opportunities and challenges. This section outlined the political context in which South Korea developed its middle power capacity, middle power diplomacy and middlepowermanship.

2.2 Middle Power Capacity

Hard Power

In terms of physical size, the Republic of Korea is a medium country, ranking 109 out of 257 states.⁴⁰ In comparison to North Korea, the South has less natural resources, but a higher population. When it comes to hard power, most scholars agree that South Korea has been in the middle upper segment since the early 1990s.⁴¹

However, South Korea had to go through an arduous and remarkable journey to get to that position. Right after the Korean War, South Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world, with a gross domestic product per capita of 67 US dollar in 1953⁴². For the first decades of the existence of the Republic of Korea, it was economically worse off than the North. South Korea received a large amount of financial aid which was needed badly in order to rebuild what was destroyed during the war. Because of this, South Korea's economy did not grow much during the first decade. From the 1960s, however, the ball of economic development started rolling and its speed increased rapidly. This remarkably fast development is often proudly referred to as "the miracle of the Han river", and is usually attributed to the perseverance of the Korean people and the economic policy of the military dictator Park Chung-hee, who ruled from 1961 to 1979. Rapid economic development continued after Park Chung-hee's demise. By 1990 South Korea's GDP per capita had reached 6,642.5 dollar, and by 2015 it had increased to 27,221.5 dollar, ranking it 29th of the world.⁴³

³⁹ Of course these nuclear tests are not stand-alone events and must be seen within the context of the political situation described above. Unfortunately the scope of this thesis does not allow me to discuss the details of the nuclear crises in detail.

⁴⁰ CIA World Factbook <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2147rank.html#ks> viewed on 11-07-2016

⁴¹ See for example Robertson (2007) and Kim (2009)

⁴² Van der Lugt (2001) p.30

⁴³ <http://data.worldbank.org/> viewed on 11-07-2016

Along with the economic development, the defense budget has increased almost every year, going from 0.148 billion US dollar in 1960 to 24.169 billion dollar in 2008.⁴⁴ Current military power rankings list South Korea at the 7th place.⁴⁵

Soft power

For a long time, South Korea was known as a poor, aid-dependent country. As its economic capacity increased and the international political environment became more favorable, South Korea started to make itself known to the world. Until the end of the Cold War South Korea's diplomatic ties were limited to the US and other Western countries, but in the 1990s it broadly expanded its diplomatic relations. Between 1989 and 1990 Korea formed diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and a number of former Eastern bloc countries, and China followed in 1992.⁴⁶

South Korea's soft power capacity can be divided into two parts. The first is soft power achieved through international participation and active global branding by the government. The country started becoming more and more successful in actively promoting itself abroad from the end of the 1980s. The first major proof of that can be seen in 1988, when Seoul got to host the Olympic games. Since then, it has become more and more active in the international arena, vastly expanding its regional and global network. It became a member of the United Nations in 1991. At first South Korea's networking was mainly aimed at economic cooperation. Robertson wrote that "during the 1990s, South Korea emerged as a pivotal player in the global economy", giving as examples its role in the establishment of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in 1989, its entrance into the Organization for Cooperation and Economic Development (OECD) in 1996 and its role in the foundation of the G20 in 1999.⁴⁷ It also made efforts to export its economic success story as a model for other developing countries. At the beginning of the 21st century, under Roh Moo-hyun and even more so under Lee Myung-bak, South Korea started to actively participate in other areas such as Multinational peace keeping operations (PKO), overseas development assistance (ODA) and other foreign policy niches such as green growth.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Moon and Lee (2009) p.74-75

⁴⁵ Business Insider, 3 October 2015, RANKED: the world's 20 strongest militaries <http://uk.businessinsider.com/these-are-the-worlds-20-strongest-militaries-ranked-2015-9?r=US&IR=T> viewed on 11-07-2016

⁴⁶ Park (2005) p. 161-162

⁴⁷ Robertson (2007) p. 156. However, Robertson only uses these examples to show South Korea's growing economic importance, but doesn't see this role in economic cooperation as middle power behavior, as he argues on page 157 that "during the 1990s, South Korean foreign policy behavior did not reflect its middle-power capacity." I would argue, on the other hand, that participating in these forums was a deliberate choice in order to expand its multilateral influence, which is generally considered to be middle power behavior.

⁴⁸ Hermanns (2013)

The second type of soft power is the rising popularity of South Korean cultural productions, most notably dramas and music. This phenomenon is known as ‘hallyu’, or ‘Korean Wave’, and started in East Asia in the late 1990s, but by now there are many K-drama and K-pop fans around the world. Although the government in Seoul attempted to “ride the Korean Wave as part of a wider approach of soft power branding”,⁴⁹ most of it happened beyond government control. A good example of this is the song titled ‘Gangnam Style’ by Psy in 2012. It unexpectedly became a number 1 hit all over the world “without any government support or backing by a large entertainment company.”⁵⁰

2.3 Middle Power Diplomacy

The first time a South Korean president used the word ‘middle power’ was in 1991, when Roh Tae-woo said in his Hoover Institution speech that South Korea would “seek new roles as a middle power”.⁵¹ Both Roh Tae-woo and his successor, Kim Young-sam, proposed multilateral forums to tackle Korean peninsula related issues.⁵² However, most scholars do not recognize this as the early beginnings of middle power behavior. Shin wrote that “the extent to which Seoul was genuinely prepared to exercise middlepowermanship during these two presidencies is questionable,” because “despite rhetoric over multilateral approaches to peninsular matters, it is difficult to identify specific examples of Seoul successfully utilizing any multilateral platforms.”⁵³ By implying that the middle power aspirations of these two presidents were nothing but empty words, he overlooks the fact that at the time of Roh’s election, South Korea wasn’t yet a member of any significant multilateral platforms, and even bilateral diplomatic relations with all the states with high interests in North Korea had not been established yet. It was exactly during these two presidencies, and especially during Roh’s so-called Nordpolitik, that South Korea entered into diplomatic relations with several new countries and started to actively participate in international institutions. According to De Ceuster, “the pragmatic foreign policy of President Roh Tae Woo lured Russia and China away from the rigidly dogmatic and confrontational foreign policies of North Korea”.⁵⁴ One could, therefore, make the claim that these two presidents, backed by improved economic and political circumstances,

⁴⁹ Cooper (2015) p. 3

⁵⁰ Hermanns (2013) p. 75

⁵¹ Cited in Robertson (2007) p. 156

⁵² Shin (2015) p. 9

⁵³ Shin (2015) p. 9

⁵⁴ De Ceuster (2005) p. 68

helped lay the foundations and set up the first networks which enabled their successors to pursue their middle power strategies.

In 1998, Kim Dae-jung took office. His administration's signature policy was the so-called Sunshine Policy, which focused on cooperation and reconciliation with the North. His greatest achievement was the summit between him and Kim Jong-il in 2000, for which he received a Nobel Peace prize. He was the first president to explicitly say that military actions against the North and reunification through absorption were out of the question.

Roh Moo-hyun wanted to continue Kim's engagement policy towards North Korea, as part of his foreign policy package that was aimed at building regional "peace and prosperity". But the US' newly adopted hardline North Korea policy, which included the contemplation of military measures against North Korea made this endeavor very difficult. From 2005 Roh started to promote his "North East Asian balancer" discourse, saying that South Korea can and should play a leading role in finding a balanced and multilateral solution to regional issues through dialogue. This was a policy that assumed a "more equal relationship with China and the United States".⁵⁵ By distancing itself from the US' hardline policy, South Korea under Roh attempted to play more neutral, mediating role.

When Lee Myung-bak was installed as president in 2008, he introduced his so-called 'Global Korea' policy. This policy was mainly designed to raise South Korea's international participation and status on the global stage. In contrast to previous presidencies, North Korea got a less prominent place in the list of policy goals. In terms of his North Korea policy, Lee chose a hardline approach and sought to restore the ties with the US.

2.4 Middlepowermanship

Historical Background

If we want to understand the middlepowermanship of the most recent governments, we should not only look at the external factors that shaped Korea's geopolitical situation, but we also need to take a closer look at the internal processes that shaped Korean politics –and again, there is an interaction between the two. In order to do this, I will again take look at South Korea's recent history, but this time from a more internal perspective.

As noted before, Korea had to endure the humiliation of being the victim of struggles between greater powers and subsequently being annexed by Japan at the start of the 20th century. After Korea was liberated from Japan, its troubles were not over yet. With the foundation of the capitalist

⁵⁵ Hermanns (2013) p. 64

Republic of Korea in the South, and the communist Democratic Peoples Republic in the North in 1948, the new South Korean state and its leader, Syngman Rhee, immediately found themselves in an existential crisis. There were now two Korean governments, with opposing ideologies and each claiming to be the legitimate government of the entire Korean peninsula. By emphasizing the existential and urgent national threat that the North and its Communism posed, the ideology of anti-Communism could be used to mobilize the people⁵⁶, suppress dissent and divert attention from state and its leaders' own wrongdoings.⁵⁷ The National Security Law was proclaimed, a law that enabled persecution of those found guilty of collaboration with, or of expression of sympathy for North Korea. In this period the tensions were so high that if you were so much as suspected of having pro-communist sentiments, this could easily get you killed⁵⁸.

In 1950, these tensions reached a climax and the fears became reality as the Korean War erupted. Three years of suffering and destruction left deep wounds in both North and South Korea. Consecutive governments continued to stress (US-led) anti-communism as the only way to guarantee state survival. This marked the beginning of what Bleiker called "the emergence of antagonistic identities", meaning that both Korea's constructed a negative identity of being the antithesis of a dangerous and inherently evil "other".⁵⁹ According to him, these identities "are not only deeply entrenched, but also lie at the heart of the current security dilemmas".⁶⁰ For the authoritarian leaders that ruled South Korea until the late eighties, anti-communist ideology and crisis discourse were a useful tool to keep the people in check and motivated,⁶¹ and also to "reassure the US [of South Korea's loyalty], which financed over 50 percent of Korea's national budget and 72.4 percent of the defense budget".⁶²

Although Park Chung-hee, who came to power through a military coup in 1961, used these methods as well, he was the first president that added a 'positive' aspiration to South Korea's identity, namely that of a economically independent country. Through repressive yet effective economic policy, he managed to "wean the economy off aid dependency and lead it towards rapid independent economic developments".⁶³

As time went by, the call for democratization grew stronger and stronger. Since South Korea had surpassed its northern enemy in terms of economic and military development in the 1970s the

⁵⁶ See: Jung (2009)

⁵⁷ See: An (2008)

⁵⁸ Many civilian massacres took place during this period.

⁵⁹ Bleiker (2005) p. 10

⁶⁰ Bleiker (2005) p. 10

⁶¹ In saying this, I am in no way implying that North Korea wasn't posing a real and substantial threat.

⁶² Kim (2004) p. 70

⁶³ Buzo, p. 104

crisis discourse surrounding North Korea became less convincing.⁶⁴ This is one of the many reasons why pro-democracy activists became more vocal. After a bloody struggle for democratization, the last authoritarian dictator, Chun Doo-hwan succumbed to the pressures and opened the way for direct presidential elections.

As noted earlier, Roh Tae-woo, the first president after the democratization struggle, was the first to suggest that South Korea could be a middle power, and started expanding the country's networking capacity. Furthermore, after the democratization a new wind of more progressive voices started to blow in South Korean politics. A new generation, the so-called "386 Generation", "emerged as the driving force in South Korean politics during the 1990s, being well equipped with excellent organizational and leadership skills acquired during the intense pro-democracy struggles of the 1980s".⁶⁵ On top of that, this generation had a more "ambivalent attitude" toward the United States.⁶⁶ With the absolute rhetoric of crisis because of a communist threat greatly diminished, and perhaps also because of the news of increasing food shortages in the North, a new atmosphere of reconciliation with the North started to emerge. The embodiment of this atmosphere was president Kim Dae-jung. He achieved much in the relationship with North Korea (and with other states in the region, such as Japan⁶⁷, but there was also some criticism from the conservative camp. They accused him of appeasing a corrupt and evil regime, and that he did too little to address North Korea's human rights issue⁶⁸. Similar criticisms were later also passed on to the Roh Moo-hyun government. The debate between conservatives and progressives on how to deal with North Korea (and other issues, such as social issues within South Korea) continues to this day.

The Middle Power Dream: Roh Moo-hyun vs Lee Myung-bak

The two most important factors that have determined how South Korea sees its place in the world are the traumas of losing its independence and being divided by great powers. These two factors have shaped and motivated South Korea's middlepowermanship during each presidency. However, it seems that its middlepowermanship has undergone a major shift between the presidency of Roh Moo-hyun and his successor Lee Myung-bak. How is this possible? They are from the same Korea, and were even born only 5 years apart from each other. If one takes a closer look, one can see that the same traumas are visible in both. Both agree that South Korea has undergone a drastic development from poor, insignificant country to developed country with medium capacity both in terms of hard and soft power. They both seek a more significant role, but it seems that Roh is more

⁶⁴ Kim and Lim, p. 75-76

⁶⁵ Kim and Lim P. 74

⁶⁶ Kim and Lim P. 74

⁶⁷ De Ceuster (2005) p. 78

⁶⁸ Chubb (2013), p. 91

concerned with first tackling the most pressing regional issues. Frustrated with the US not supporting the engagement policy toward North Korea, he decided that Korea should step up and take on an active middle power role to mediate a multilateral solution. A very important part of this is to overcome mistrust and antagonistic feelings among regional players.⁶⁹

Lee on the other hand, is trying to promote South Korea as a global player, despite the regional tensions. He envisioned a Korea that “leaves behind a habit of diplomacy narrowly geared to the Korean Peninsula, and adopts a more open and enterprising posture that sees the world stage as the appropriate platform for its foreign policy and national interests”.⁷⁰ In other words, whereas Roh sees the North Korean issue as an opportunity to prove itself as an independent state with middle power skills that can help change the regional issues, Lee sees it as an obstacle for successfully advertizing South Korea as a middle power within the status quo. This explains why Lee returned to the US alliance. It also explains why Lee was much more concerned with status. Lee wanted to simply be ‘good at the game’, while Roh wanted to make the game more pleasant for everyone by changing the rules.

Their different middlepowermanship styles also fit within the conservatives versus progressives debate. Both have very different opinions about how South Korea’s internal and foreign affairs should be handled. It is common in democracies to have a shift to the other side of the political spectrum if the majority of the country is dissatisfied with the policies of the current president, especially if the voter has only limited and polarized options to choose from. Therefore, one can argue that the shift in middlepowermanship also reflects public opinion to a certain extent. Important to keep in mind here is the fact that citizens do not only vote based on foreign policy, so other points in the candidate’s electoral campaign should be taken into consideration as well.

Another interesting and important aspect is the background of both presidents. It is understandable that a human rights lawyer (Roh) governs a country in a profoundly different way than a former CEO of a large company (Lee) does. Lee is often said to be a “CEO president” that runs the country like a company and that tries to sell the product or brand called “Korea” to the world.⁷¹

Conclusion

⁶⁹ Park (2006) p. 169

⁷⁰ Hermanns (2013) p. 65

⁷¹ Hermanns (2013) p. 71

The question of whether a certain country is a middle power is not a simple “yes” or “no” question. It depends on one’s definition of the term “middle power”, and the criteria one uses. But usually a definition, or a label if you will, does not acknowledge the uniqueness of each country. Surely something can be said about typical middle power characteristics and behaviors, but if one truly wants to understand a country’s development and (changing) behavior you need to look beyond general assumptions and look at its specific situation.

Just because black-and-white labeling is problematic, that doesn’t mean that researchers should have nothing to hold on to when analyzing middle powers. In this thesis I proposed a framework for understanding the emergence and developments of a middle power by analyzing the interactions between political opportunity structures, capacity, diplomacy and middlepowermanship. I used the case of South Korea to illustrate the application of this model.

When analyzing individual states, valuable insights about general international dynamics can be gained and confirmed. For example, the Korean case shows a clear interaction between political opportunity structures, hard power and soft power. Economic development coincided with a shift towards more favorable political opportunity structures, enabling South Korea to increase its network power and venture into middle power diplomacy. Furthermore, hard power, and in the current age economic power in particular, opens up windows of opportunity for developing soft power that would otherwise have remained closed. It grants access to the networks of ‘rich countries’ and also allows a country to make itself and its landmark product brands, and by extension, its culture, known to the world. Economic capacity also helps to land hosting projects of major events, which in turn offer opportunities to showcase the country. To complete the circle: the more power a state acquires, the more influence it has over other states and the more it can help shape the political opportunity structures. But the case of South Korea confirms once more that it is very difficult, if not impossible, for middle powers to fundamentally change areas that concern great power’s vital interests. The different middlepowermanships of the Roh Moo-hyun and the Lee Myung-bak administration illustrate how Korea struggled with the ultimate middle power dilemma: should it play along with the big powers or should it try to negotiate change?

South Korea’s foreign policy options, and thereby also its identity, have for a long time been determined by (its relationship with) North Korea and the United States. With the rise of South Korea’s hard and soft power capacity, it became more confident and eager to take matters back into its own hands and determine its own fate. Kim Daejung attempted to achieve this by seeking reconciliation with the North and by taking the lead in finding a multilateral solution to the North Korean issue. When the US became an obstacle to this process of reconciliation, the next president, Roh Moo-hyun, tried to move away from the US and made efforts to pursue a multilateral North

Korea policy in a more independent way, seeking to be a middle power with a balancer role. Under president Lee Myung-bak, South Korea made a u-turn. He tried to fulfill South Korea's middle power ambitions by re-engaging with the United States and make South Korea's role as a middle power more global and less dependent on the North Korea issue. Whether the North Korean issue can be solved through diplomatic methods remains to be seen. It seems that South Korea under Lee Myung-bak has given up on (finding a solution to) the North Korea issue as a middle power goal. It has learned to live with this 'thorn in the flesh' and has found a way to establish itself as a successful middle power despite of it, by focusing on other niches.

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